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Native-Speakerism in Students at an English-Only University in Japan: Contradictory Beliefs and Emerging Counter-Native-Speakerism Discourse

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Abstract

This pilot study investigates students' attitudes toward native-speakerism at an English-medium university in Japan, where I conducted my research as an international master's student. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed to analyze data obtained from structured interviews with two participants enrolled at the university. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore whether native-speakerism influences their perceptions of Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs). The results indicated that (1) both participants exhibited a negative attitude toward native-speakerism to some extent, expressing discourses countering native-speakerism such as one needs to learn to be a teacher and both NESTs and NNESTs have their own advantages; (2) however, they also produced discourses aligned with native-speakerism, suggesting its subtle and pervasive influence. These findings imply that while native-speakerism continues to affect students' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs, there are emerging shifts in learners' identities in relation to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

要旨

本パイロット研究は、私が修士課程の外国人留学生として日本の英語教育を行う大学における学生の「ネイティブ・スピーカー主義」に対する態度を調査するものである。データ分析には批判的談話分析（CDA）を用い、大学に在籍している 2 人の参加者に対する構造化インタビューから得られたデータを分析しました。本質的研究の目的は、ネイティブ・スピーカー主義が、ネイティブ英語話者教師（NEST）と非ネイティブ英語話者教師（NNEST）に対する認識にどのように影響するかを探ることでした。結果として、（1）両参加者はネイティブ・スピーカー主義に対してある程度否定的な態度を示し、教師としての訓練が必要であり、NEST と NNEST それぞれに利点があるといったネイティブ・スピーカー主義に反する談話を表明しました；(2) しかし、彼らはまた、ネイティブ・スピーカー主義に賛同する談話も生じさせており、ネイティブ・スピーカー主義が微妙に浸透していることが示唆された。これらの結果は、ネイティブ・スピーカー主義が学生の NEST と NNEST に対する認識に引き続き影響を与えている一方で、共通語としての英語（ELF）に関する学習者のアイデンティティにおいて新たな変化が生じていることを示唆しています。

The purpose of learning English has evolved in the past few years, from as a tool to learn about the cultures of English-speaking countries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, to as a *lingua franca* which is used by speakers with different native languages from non-English speaking countries to communicate and cooperate with each other across various global contexts (Crystal, 2003). Consequently, elements within English Language Teaching (ELT)—such as which language model should be taught and learned, who is qualified for teaching, and what pedagogy should be adopted—are also expected to evolve accordingly. However, research shows that English language is still often perceived as a "living artefact belonging to a foreign country, not as a tool for international communication" (Seargeant, 2009). The concept of "native-speakerism" emerged within such context, referring to an ideology that prioritizes the Western norms in ELT, including the language model for learners, the qualifications of teachers, and the pedagogical methodologies developed by Western institutions (Holliday, 2005).

My interest in "native-speakerism" emerged as a result of the changes in my English learning environment. As a Chinese learner of English as a Foreign Language, I initially learned English in mainland China, where native-speakerism was often promoted as an ideal approach to learning English. people do not think this is something problematic and are promoting it as a good way to learn English. Later, I pursued my graduate studies in English Language Teaching at an English-only university in Japan, where English is used as a *lingua franca*. The change of the purpose of learning English and language environment made me realize that English primarily serves as a tool for global communication among speakers with different native languages, and that English teaching methodologies should be localized to better meet the needs of diverse student populations. I also began to realize that in environments where English functions as a *lingua franca*, learners may perceive teachers and teaching methodologies differently from the perspectives advocated by native-speakerism.

There has been considerable research on the topic of "native-speakerism" since this term has emerged, and research has shown its impact on non-English-speaking countries' English education, including Japan (Kubota, 2022). Native-speakerism has brought issues such as prejudice and discrimination towards both NEST and NNEST (Tsurii, 2019), and has also hindered students' development of critical thinking skills and their ability to challenge authority (Holliday, 2005). Consequently, there have been calls for a reevaluation of such attitudes and for reforms in English language education practices. In Japan, several institutions have begun to respond to these calls, working to challenge entrenched attitudes

toward native-speakerism and adopt teaching methodologies that reflect the reality of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). For instance, new colleges within traditional Japanese universities, such as the School of International Liberal Studies at Waseda University, have been established to foster students' English language proficiency in ELF contexts. Furthermore, English-only universities such as Asia Pacific University (APU) and Akita International University (AIU) have been created to provide learning environments conducive to ELF, promoting the integration of students from diverse international backgrounds (Wadden & Hale, 2019). At AIU, for example, all courses are taught in English, and students are required to participate in English-medium programs abroad as a graduation requirement. The university also hosts exchange students from a wide range of countries, further solidifying the role of English as a *lingua franca* on campus.

The focus of this paper is to explore students' attitudes toward "native-speakerism" within such an ELF context, and to explore how they perceive their teachers, both NESTs and NNESTs. Accordingly, this research is designed as a pilot study to address the following research question:

What are students' attitudes toward "native-speakerism" within an ELF learning context?

Literature Review
Native-Speakerism in Japanese Higher Education
Research has shown that the prevalence of "native-speakerism" has resulted inequities that have had detrimental effects on English higher education in Japan. For instance, regarding educational institutions, Houghton and Rivers (2013) examined employment practices in higher education and highlighted that "while 'non-native speakers' are certainly victims of prejudice and discrimination at the pre-employment stage, 'native speakers' are also victims of prejudice and discrimination at the post-employment stage." Furthermore, the influence of native-speakerism on hiring practices is evident in university prospectuses, which often emphasize "English conversation" and "language skill training" provided by "native speakers" to attract prospective students (Tsurii, 2019). These researchers advocate for a more nuanced understanding of the diverse linguistic and national backgrounds of educators and the broader purpose of learning English—as a *lingua franca*—in a globalized world.

Native-Speakerism Among Japanese Teacher Trainees
Regarding teacher trainees, Lowe's (2022) research on native-speakerism among Japanese teacher trainees shows the influence of native-speakerism on teachers' beliefs about the

English language model, the qualifications of English language teachers, and acceptable teaching methodology. Similarly, Matikainen's (2019) study demonstrates that after a course that introduces *Methods for Teaching English as An International Language*, teacher trainees form several small but important beliefs that counter native-speakerism. This shift is particularly encouraging for NNESTs, who have historically been regarded as less qualified compared to NESTs due to the pervasive influence of native-speakerism.

Native-Speakerism Among Japanese English Learners

Research on the impact of native-speakerism on learners suggests that it leads to students' passive attitudes toward learning. Moreover, students influenced by native-speakerism tend to be reluctant to challenge authority and struggle to develop critical thinking skills, which are regarded as essential competencies in modern society (Holliday, 2005).

Despite the pervasive influence of native-speakerism, several Japanese higher education institutions now provide an all-English learning environment. These ELF settings offer opportunities for individuals to critically reflect on the use of English and, potentially, on the concept of "native-speakerism." Akita International University (AIU), where I pursued my master's degree as an international student, serves as a representative example. At AIU, students use English as a *lingua franca* for both academic and daily interactions on campus, making their attitudes toward "native-speakerism" a valuable lens through which to examine its impact. Furthermore, such attitudes can help assess whether the efforts of Japanese higher education to create an ELF environment have been effective. Therefore, this study seeks to explore AIU students' perspectives on "native-speakerism" within this diverse and international ELF learning environment.

Methodology

This pilot study is qualitative research centered around the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an analytical approach for unraveling the (ex)(im)plicit thoughts of two ELF students in regards to "native speakerism". CDA views social phenomena as constructed rather than natural, enabling researchers to delve deeper into the co-constructed dynamics of discourse. Specifically, the strand of CDA developed by scholars such as Norman Fairclough during the 1980s and 1990s emphasizes the relationship between "language and power" or "language and ideology" (Cameron, 2001). This approach allows researchers to uncover institutionalized forms of oppression through discourse analysis. Given that this study seeks to explore these two students' attitudes toward "native-speakerism" and

investigate whether such attitudes reflect the influence of native-speakerism, I deemed that CDA was the appropriate method for analysis.

Participants

Two participants from AIU were interviewed for this study. Table 1 provides an overview of their language learning experiences. AIU is an English-medium university that hosts international students from over 200 partner universities across 50 countries, many of which are non-English-speaking. This creates a multilingual and multicultural environment where English functions as the *lingua franca* for communication on campus, which provides a valuable lens to examine the impact of "native-speakerism" within ELF context.

Table 1

Basic Information about the Two Participants

Name	Nationality	L1	L2	Degree Type	Time Spent in This University
Mei	Chinese	Mandarin	English Japanese	Graduate Student	20 months
Taro	Japanese	Japanese	English Mandarin	Undergraduate Student	32 months

Data Collection

The purpose of the interview was to explore participants' attitudes toward "native-speakerism" by encouraging them to reflect on relevant aspects of their past English learning experiences. I selected structured interview format as it allows researchers greater control of topics over the interview process (Nunan, 2004). By answering predetermined and organized questions, participants were able to concentrate on topics directly related to the research focus. When designing the questions, I referred to the question list developed by Wang and Fang (2020), as these questions had already been piloted in their study and were proven effective in eliciting participants' explicit attitudes toward native-speakerism as well as their underlying beliefs. The interview questions are presented below.

1. During your English learning process, when did you start learning from native English-speaking teachers (NESTs)? What was your impression of your NESTs?
2. In your opinion, what are the differences between NESTs and NNESTs? In other words, what are the different characteristics they have? How do these differences influence their teaching practices?
3. Do you prefer NNESTs' courses or NESTs' courses at the university?

4. What is your understanding of native-speakerism? Can you think of any examples of native-speakerism based on your English learning experiences at universities?
5. What do you think of the future of English language teaching in Japan?

Procedure

Prior to the interviews, I invited friends and classmates at AIU who are non-native English speakers to participate. Two individuals accepted the invitation and were interviewed separately within one week. To ensure high-quality recordings and minimize distractions, the interviews were conducted in self-study rooms within the library, where privacy was maintained, and interruptions were avoided.

At the beginning of the interview, I explained to the participants that the purpose was to gather their attitudes toward different types of teachers—NESTs and NNESTs—based on their English learning experiences. After this, I proceeded to ask the questions outlined in the "Data Collection" section. I did not explain the definition of the term "native-speakerism" until just before asking the fourth question: "What is your understanding of native-speakerism? Can you think of any examples of native-speakerism based on your English learning experiences at universities?" This approach was intended to prevent the definition from influencing participants' initial responses regarding their impressions of NESTs and NNESTs.

After the interviews, I used a free online program called "iFLYTEK" to transcribe the audio recordings into text files. I then carefully reviewed the transcription by listening to the recordings and made necessary corrections to ensure accuracy.

Analysis

As above-mentioned, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was selected as the analytical approach for this study; specifically, Cameron's (2001) strand of CDA. As it is customary in this type of analytical approach, I carefully read through the transcription and highlighted words, phrases, and sentences in the participants' responses that related to their general attitudes toward native-speakerism, as well as their descriptions of the differences between NESTs and non-native NNESTs.

Results and Discussion

This section will first present the findings regarding the two participants' general attitudes toward native-speakerism, which were both found to be negative to some extent. Next, a

table will be provided that categorizes the participants' detailed descriptions of their impressions of NESTs and NNESTs, highlighting both differences and similarities. Finally, I will compare the participants' detailed descriptions with their general statements of their attitude to examine whether there is consistency or inconsistency. This comparison may reveal whether or not native-speakerism has influenced their attitudes.

Attitudes Towards Native-Speakerism: One Needs to Learn to be a Teacher and Both Types of Teacher Have Their own Advantages

Neither of the participants was familiar with the concept of native-speakerism prior to my explanation. The exact way in which I defined native-speakerism to the participants can be found in Extracts 1 and 2; however, the essence of my explanation is as follows: Native-speakerism has two ideas. First, the English spoken by native speakers is the final learning model for English learners; and second, the native English-speaking teachers are better at teaching English than non-native English-speaking teachers.

Upon learning the definition of native-speakerism, Mei immediately expressed her negative attitude toward it, stating, "Oh, I don't think so." She then pointed out what she believed to be the core factor contributing to qualifications of teachers: "One needs to learn to be a teacher."

Extract 1:
R: Researcher
M: Mei

R: That's great. Then um have you heard a word, a term, which is native speakerism?

M: No, but I think it, is this. uh, is it about like the native speakers are the best?

R: Yeah, in terms of the English learning models, they are the final models of uh English learners. And also, uh, uh, there is a another uh, meaning that native English speaking teachers are better at teaching English than non-native English speaking teachers.

M: oh, <u>I don't think so</u>. Because one <u>need to learn to be a teacher.</u> They are not born teachers. You know that, right? So I think it is unfair to say that native speaker are better teachers for teaching learnings, for teaching English. yes. I

think I am a Chinese native speaker, but I cannot say that I can teach Chinese. You know that, right?

When stating her reasons for why she did not agree with native-speakerism, Mei mentioned that in terms of being a good teacher, the training process matters. Mei pointed out the aspect that is often ignored when people are having a debate about the advantages and disadvantages of NEST and NNEST, which is the professionalism of the job as a teacher. No matter how fluent and accurate a NEST or NNEST is in English, the ability to perform English well does not necessarily mean one can teach others. Teaching is professional work and requires training and a large amount of practice.

As for Taro, he didn't comment after I explained the definition of native-speakerism. Instead, he straightly talked about the different advantages of NEST and NNEST. He said "about daily conversation, the native speakers can teach better" but in terms of "the grammar, I think Japanese non-native teacher can teach us." His response recognized the language model provided by NEST but objected to fully accepting the idea of native-speakerism that prioritize NEST in terms of every aspects.

Extract 2:
R: Researcher
T: Taro

R: Okay. Thank you. Then uh, here is a word, a term, native speakerism. Have you heard of this before?

T: Um, no.

R: Okay. So uh this refers to, it has two meaning. The first one is that for us English learners, our final goal, our final model is the native English speakers. This is our language model. This is one meaning and second meaning is that native English speaking teachers are better at teaching English than non-native English speaking teacher. The first one is language model, the second one is they are good at, they are better at teaching. So um do you, have you, have you experienced such?

T: In the daily bases, <u>about daily conversation, the native speakers can teach better</u>. Because they know much, much more we can use in the daily

conversation, so kind of active English. They can teach. But non-native teachers has limited words. This will make the teaching limited at the daily conversation level. But the grammars or the English level that we shall learn for the entrance examination, <u>the grammar, I think Japanese non-native teacher can teach us</u>, because I also learned English by Japanese, so we have a commonsense. They know what I think, kind of feelings, so in the grammars, some kind of for test or exam, Japanese professor or Japanese teachers can teach us better.

Participants' Descriptions of Their Impression NEST and NNEST

The participants' descriptions of their impressions of NESTs and NNESTs are categorized in Table 2. Both participants talked about the differences between NESTs and NNESTs in terms of their respective advantages and teaching styles, as well as situations in which NESTs and NNESTs could be considered similar.

Table 2

Participants' Descriptions of Their Impression of NEST and NNEST

		NEST	NNEST
Differences in Advantages	Mei	Pronunciation	---
	Taro	Daily use/active English	Examination preparation
		Fluency	Common feeling
Differences in Teaching style	Mei	More open-minded	Persuasive
		Relaxing	Teacher-centered
		Involved	
		Friendly	
	Taro	Casual	Grammar-based
		Less attention to tiny mistakes	Focus on tiny mistakes
			More comfortable at the lower level
		Scary at the lower level	
No difference	Mei	How to teach matters	
		No differences in reading class	
	Taro	No differences at higher level	

By examining both the participants' general attitudes and their detailed descriptions of NESTs and NNESTs, I noticed that some aspects were consistent, while others were not. In the following section, I will focus on these discourses and interpret them in light of the potential influence of native-speakerism.

Discourse Associated with Native-Speakerism: NEST Has Better Pronunciation and More Active English, While They are Scary to a Lower-Level Learner of English

The differences outlined in Table 2 may reflect subjective expressions based on the participants' observations and reflections on their English learning experiences. However, from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), these differences could also be seen as manifestations of hidden native-speakerism, which conceals itself under the guise of being "different but equal" and naturalizing the discriminative beliefs associated with native-speakerism by normalizing the differences.

When both participants discussed the advantages and teaching styles of NESTs, they sometimes implied a preference for these practices, suggesting that such attributes were aspects that NNESTs could not replicate. For example, Mei highlighted the advantage of better pronunciation among NESTs.

Extract 3:
R: Researcher
M: Mei

> R: Uh, I see, I see. Then do you have any preference of these two kind of teachers' class, native speaker teachers' class, or non-native?
>
> M: I don't really have a preference because I think both of them are necessary. For example, when you are trying to debate or you are trying to talk, of course, a native speaker may, may like they will <u>correct your pronunciation</u> and you will hear the native speakers. But for reading class, I think, well, it doesn't really matter if it is a native speaker or not.

Mei implied that NESTs might be more effective at correcting students' pronunciation. However, as English is used as a *lingua franca*, the primary focus of pronunciation is mutual understanding (Shimizu, 2011). Native speakers with different accents can offer diverse models of pronunciation, helping students understand the real-world usage of English, but the emphasis is placed on core pronunciations that do not impede communication. These core pronunciations need to be trained among both NESTs and NNESTs (Jenkins, 2000). Mei's attribution of superior pronunciation correction to NESTs could be viewed as a misunderstanding of the teacher's role, influenced by native-speakerism.

The second example is that Taro talked about the advantage of NEST that they knew more daily use of English and their English was "active".

> *Extract 4:*
> Taro: In the daily bases, <u>about daily conversation, the native speakers can teach better</u>. Because they know much much more we can use in the daily conversation, so kind of active English. They can teach. But non-native teachers has limited words. This will make the teaching limited at the daily conversation level……

Admittedly, native speakers of English, due to their cultural background, may find it easier to engage in daily conversations in English. However, in the context of ELF, the "English daily conversation" that learners often encounter does not typically occur with native English speakers (Jenkins, 2000). Successful communication in this context requires intercultural sensitivity and an understanding of how conversations are shaped by the cultural backgrounds of the speakers. Therefore, both native and non-native English teachers need to be trained. Taro's perception that NESTs are better at daily conversation may stem from the influence of native-speakerism, which positions NESTs as the ideal model for English learners. In this regard, while Taro sought to reject native-speakerism by highlighting the advantages of both types of teachers, his differentiation inadvertently led him to embrace another form of native-speakerism, one that upholds the spoken language of native speakers as the better model for English learners.

Furthermore, Taro mentioned twice (Extracts 5 and 6) that he felt "scared" when taking courses taught by NESTs during his first year of college, suggesting that he did not always view NESTs as better than NNESTs. He preferred to take courses with NNESTs at the lower levels of English proficiency, and only when his English reached a higher level did he feel comfortable switching to courses taught by NESTs.

Extract 5:
R: Researcher
T: Taro

> R: Ok, I see I see. Yes, that's quite different from my experience. So, um so you have two answers. you have two types of native-English speaking teachers. You had native English-speaking teachers at high school, although they just

just talk to you a little, but there are also another type of teacher. That is, is at university. Then, what, what's your impression of native English teacher at university?

T: <u>The first time I was scared. Yeah, I was not used to, kind of sweat. Yes, my feeling was scared.</u> It was the best expression for me and after one month, two months, I was used to speak. At that time, I felt interested. Oh, yeah, I know I can, I can speak English. A little, a little, like that. So enjoyable. And <u>now I don't have sense of scary towards native speakers, first time but the first time here at the university, I was scared.</u>

Extract 6:
R: I see. Yeah, that's very… um… very different style. Ok let's say in the university, at the university, you have both uh courses uh from Japanese teachers of English and native English-speaking teacher. Do you have any preference?

T: Yeah. Em. <u>In first level of my EAP course, I preferred to take the non-native English teacher. Because I was so scared to speak with native speakers</u>. Yeah, I want to take the Japanese professors but after several, now, third grade, I don't have such kind of preference. I decide whether the professor is interest or the class is exciting or not. Now I don't have such preference, but on the first grade, I preferred a non-native English professor.

The fact that Taro attributed his anxiety towards NNESTs to his low level of English during his freshman year, rather than to factors such as cultural unfamiliarity, more complex course content, or the teacher's strictness, suggests that he believed he needed to attain a sufficient level of English proficiency and do enough practice before he could effectively communicate with or learn from NESTs. This belief can be interpreted as an influence of native-speakerism, since it posits that NESTs provide "better language model" so learners need to attain a certain basic level before they can learn from the better language model.

Conclusion

Both students expressed negative attitudes toward native-speakerism to some extent; however, their discourses still contained elements associated with native-speakerism, indicating that they remained influenced by it. This contradiction may be attributed to the conflict between the pervasive presence of native-speakerism in Japan's English education system and the ELF environment at this English-only university. While the students were unable to

fully escape the influence of native-speakerism, they began to recognize its negative effects and irrational aspects. Therefore, despite the ongoing influence of native-speakerism, both students also articulated discourses that counter it, suggesting the emergence of their identities as learners of ELF. At the same time, they began to critically reflect on what is of true importance to them as learners of ELF.

The results of this study have several implications for the development of both NNESTs and NESTs. For NNESTs, the focus should be on continuously improving their English proficiency in order to serve as effective models for students, demonstrating how English is used in real-world contexts. For example, NNESTs could enhance their ability to conduct "daily conversation", which is one of the concerns mentioned by Taro. NNESTs should recognize that English, when used as a *lingua franca*, involves communication not only with native speakers but also with speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Thus, the goal is not necessarily to use "correct" English, but to facilitate mutual understanding within an intercultural communication framework. This skill develops through ongoing interaction with other English speakers and self-reflection. As NNESTs continue this process, they will improve in their ability to conduct "daily conversations", an area that was previously seen as a shortcoming. Additionally, adopting the above attitude toward learning and using English within the context of ELF serves as a powerful model for students, demonstrating how English is actually used globally and positively influencing their attitudes toward learning and using the language.

For NESTs, while they remain an important model for English usage, it would be beneficial if they could raise students' awareness of the diversity in English use, emphasizing that multiple ways of using the language can lead to successful communication. One practical approach to fostering this awareness is for NESTs to prioritize meaning over form when offering corrective feedback. By doing so, experiences like Taro's—where students feel anxious or intimidated by NESTs—may be minimized, and NESTs can become more effective language models, even for students at lower levels of proficiency.

Functioning as a pilot study, the findings of this research provide some insights into university students' attitudes toward native-speakerism in Japan, an area that deserves further investigation and discussion. To further explore the influence of native-speakerism in Japan and generate ideas for practical applications, future studies could collect data from more participants at a broader range of universities. Additionally, as the high school years are also an important stage for shaping students' beliefs and attitudes toward English learning

methods and usage, investigating the attitudes of high school students would be a valuable direction for future research. Furthermore, as I am an English learner myself, this may have influenced the participants' response and my interpretation of the results. Conducting similar research by a native English-speaking researcher might offer an interesting perspective on the issue examined in this paper.

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